

The Gadfly

Michael Herr turns the tables on America's greatest gossip.

Walter Winchell: A Novel

By Michael Herr '61
155 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$18.95.

Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea . . . Let's go to press."

Thus began the staccato radio broadcasts of gossip columnist and journalistic demagogue Walter Winchell (1897-1972), who almost single-handedly fostered the American obsession with celebrity.

In *Walter Winchell*, a fictional treatment of his life that originated as a screenplay and is written in that form, Michael Herr charts the arc of Winchell's life in brief scenes complete with camera directions.

As the novel opens, Winchell is at the zenith of his career in the late 1940s. He is installed at Table 50 in the Stork Club, where he holds forth, gathers items, socializes with Damon Runyon and Ernest Hemingway, and receives supplicants.

Winchell's daily newspaper column and weekly radio broadcast reached 50 million people when the U.S. population was 140 million. He made and broke careers, raked muck, crusaded against communists, and extolled the merits of his friends J. Edgar Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt.

Herr flashes back to Winchell's days as a

hack, second-string dancer and singer in the waning days of vaudeville, as he scrambles to survive. After receiving scant applause, the young Walter watches from the wings "with a look of pure hatred on his face" as an act of chimpanzees on rollerskates is cheered.

Winchell parlays his phenomenal nosiness—and unerring ability to uncover gossip on fellow performers—into a one-page sheet he posts on backstage callboards. This leads him to gossip columns, nationwide syndication, radio, an abortive stab at television, and show-biz hegemony.

Herr paints Winchell as a petty, capricious tyrant, perpetually eager to settle scores, flaunt his power, crush his enemies. If crossed or slighted, he was apt to launch an undying vendetta until the object of his wrath was professionally and personally annihilated.

Yet when Winchell looked with favor—on a starlet, a play, or a nightclub—he imparted success, glamor, and a measure of fame. But by and large those in his orbit feared and loathed the sting of this poisonous gadfly.

Like its protagonist, the novel is not without humor. Herr captures Winchell's quick, caustic wit, his mastery of throwaway lines—"I don't get paid to write a column," Walter says. "I get a salary for being polite to pests"—and his signature hodgepodge of

slang, Yiddish, and wisecracks. "Don't be ridic," Walter says. "Rita [Hayworth] wouldn't wipe her shoes on that *shmegegge*. He fed me a wrongo a few weeks ago, and he's working off the penalty. Five or six free items, and I'll start plugging his clients again."

Herr writes in the preface that he intends the novel to be "an entertainment in the Hollywood biopic tradition, with the undertones of history spreading beneath the jokes in various bitter shades of dark."

By the early 1960s, as the Beatles played on archrival Ed Sullivan's show and Winchell's brand of journalism became passé, Winchell retired to Florida, where he was consigned to an unimaginable fate: he was forgotten.

In 1978 Herr published a book of Vietnam War reportage, *Dispatches*, which John Le Carré called "the best book I have ever read on men and war in our time." *Dispatches* became an international best-seller and led Herr to write narration for the film *Apocalypse Now*. He also co-wrote the Vietnam film *Full Metal Jacket* with the director Stanley Kubrick.

Herr first encountered Walter Winchell while writing *The Big Room: Portraits From the Golden Age*, a book about American celebrities.

—GEORGE LOWERY



Listen To Your Body

By Ellen Michaud and Lila Larimore Anastas '62
488 pp. Emmaus, Pennsylvania: Rodale Press.
Paper, \$14.95.

This reference book, subtitled *A Head-to-Toe Guide to More than 400 Symptoms, Their Causes and Best Treatments*, covers such topics as what symptoms signal an emergency, how to recognize when a symptom is serious and when it's not, and self-help treatments and how to use them.

Margaret Atwood: Conversations

Edited by Earl G. Ingersoll G'63
241 pp. Princeton, New Jersey: Ontario Review Press. \$19.95.

Conversations With James Thurber

Edited by Thomas Fensch G'77
119 pp. Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press.

Atwood, the Canadian author of *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Cat's Eye*, is interviewed by 21 journalists from 1972 to 1987. The book includes a chronology of Atwood's life and works. Ingersoll is a SUNY Brockport English professor.

Thurber, the humorist and author of *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty*, recalls his literary apprenticeship in Europe, the early days of *The New Yorker*, and the effect of his increasing blindness on his perception of the world in this anthology of interviews conducted from 1939 to 1961. Fensch is a professor of journalism at the University of Texas.

Cheap Gossip: The Letters from Liverpool

By Sanford Phippen G'71
176pp. Gardiner, Maine: The Dog Ear Press.
Paper, \$12.95.

This is a humorous collection of columns written for a Maine newspaper while Phippen was a high school teacher in Syracuse in the mid-1970s, and includes reminiscences about the vanishing way of life in coastal Maine and satirical vignettes of Down East natives. Phippen is the author of two acclaimed short story collections, *The Police Know Everything* and *People Trying to be Good*.

In the Blue Light of African Dreams

By Paul Watkins G'88
310 pp. Houghton Mifflin: New York. \$18.95.

This adventure story of a pilot attempting a Paris-to-New York flight in 1926 features vivid aerial scenes, exotic African locales, and an attractive hero.

This is the third novel by the 26-year-old Watkins, whose previous are *Night Over Day Over Night* and *Calm at Sunset, Calm at Dawn*, the latter a winner of England's Encore Prize for the year's best second novel.

Language Maven Strikes Again

By William Safire '51
419 pp. New York: Doubleday. \$22.95.
Fumblerules: A Lighthearted Guide to Grammar and Good Usage
By William Safire
153 pp. New York: Doubleday. \$15.00.

A collection of his *New York Times* language columns, *Language Maven Strikes Again* includes Safire's witty retorts to arcane grammatical queries from his readers. *Language Maven* covers such subjects as tycoonese, computerese, and portmanteau words like *televangelist* and *Draconomics* (Safire's plan for the economy).

In *Fumblerules*, Safire offers 50 do's and don'ts for good English usage, followed by brief, humorous articles. Among them: Never, ever use repetitive redundancies. Don't use capital letters without GOOD REASON. Don't use no double negatives. If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times: Resist hyperbole. And, Take the bull by the hand and don't mix metaphors.

Safire, former senior speechwriter in the Nixon administration, has won a Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary and is a popular novelist.

MOVING? SAVE THIS AD

North American Van Lines will reduce your interstate moving cost 30% if you are a Syracuse University Alumnus. For information or free estimate call David Feldman '77 at my agency,

1-800-633-MOVE or 914-471-1504

ARNOFF

MOVING & STORAGE, INC.

 northAmerican.

If there's a pain in your chest, be a pain in the neck.

Complain to a doctor.

Emergency



American Heart Association



Participating high school students choose one of the following precollege programs: **Architecture, Drama, Engineering, Law, Liberal Arts, Management, Public Communications, or Visual Arts.** Contact Syracuse University, Division of Summer Sessions, Suite 230, 111 Waverly Ave., Syracuse, NY 13244-2320, 315-443-5400 for details.

SUMMER COLLEGE
FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS JUNE 30 - AUG. 10